

Has a detour ever done you in? You were on a long road trip to somewhere. Your back feels like it's becoming part of the car seat. The kids are in the back asking every 5 minutes, "Are we there yet?" Your patience is wearing thin, then you see it! The orange sign of doom! Detour ahead. You clench the wheel with rage. You throw your patience out the window. WHY? WHY? WHY this nuisance specifically designed to torture you. 17 extra minutes of your life that you'll never get back because now you have to drive farther into the middle of nowhere before you finally arrive. The agony of a detour has done you in. You've never hated a road so much! You've never met them, but the department of transportation has now become public enemy number one, even though they've provided every road you've driven up to this point.

If a detour has ever done you in, you might be an Israelite, or at least more like one than you think. The Israelites were on the journey called the "Exodus". God had brought them out of the slavery in Egypt by the most miraculous signs the world had seen up to that point--the Ten Plagues. **"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.' So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. (Exodus 13:17).** When the Egyptians changed their mind and caught up with them at the Red Sea, the Israelites were terrified and cried out to Moses, **"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?" (Exodus 14:11).** God again miraculously delivered them, parting the Red Sea so that they could walk through on dry ground, and sending the water crashing down to cover Pharaoh and his army.

So God continues leading the people on the scenic route further down into the Sinai Peninsula, where they camp for about a year while Moses receives the Ten Commandments and the rest of the covenant. Then God begins leading them back up the side of the eastern gulf of the Red Sea to this region on the verge of the Promised Land. They send out spies to explore the land for 40 days and when the spies come back they spread a bad report to everyone that said, **"We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are. We seemed like grasshoppers."** (Numbers 13:31,33.) Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua speak up and say, "We should take the land!" with God's power, but it was no use. The people rebelled against Moses and cried out again, **"If only we had died in Egypt! or in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword?" (Numbers 14:3)** And they planned to choose a leader to lead them back to Egypt.

That's why they tell you to be careful what you wish for. God heard their grumbling and he gave them exactly what they wished for. **"As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say; In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land, except Caleb and Joshua."** (Numbers 14:28-30).

So God passes this sentence on them, 40 years of wandering, one year for every day the spies spent exploring, and during this 40 years, everyone over age 20 is going to die. If you thought the scenic route looked too long before, now they are about to wander around this little area for the next 38 years. And during that 38 years in the middle of the barren wilderness, God feeds them and provides them with manna and quail and he doesn't even let their sandals wear out. But his "new-every morning mercies" are met with more rebellion and grumbling throughout.

Finally, their 40-year sentence of wandering is close to up. They set out from Kadesh to start making their way over and up to the Promised Land. They sent messengers to the people of Edom, their long lost cousins, the descendants of Esau who was the brother of their ancestor

Jacob. They ask if they can just pretty please pass through their land. They'll bring their own water; they won't eat the crops. But the Edomites say, "No Way, no chance!" and they even martial their army to back it up.

Do you know what that means? There's the big orange sign of doom out in the wilderness! Detour! A long one, more than 17 minutes. Now they have to go all the way down here and come all the way back up. Got to be kidding me! Remember how we loathed the 17-minute detour? Put yourself in their sandals! After 39 years out here in the wilderness, now their own cousins are going to stick with a long detour." The kids have been screaming, "How much farther?" for the last 39 years.

That detour is where our text picks up, "**They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom.**" That's when they lost it! "**The people grew impatient on the way; they grumbled against God and against Moses.**" And then they grumble their fatal question, the one they learned from their parents, "**Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!**" (Numbers 21:4-5).

That miserable food they were complaining about was the miraculous manna that God had graciously sent to feed them every day of the last 38 years. But for the Israelites, the glass wasn't just half empty, it was totally empty. It seemed like God had just been dragging them around for 4 decades. Where's the milk and honey we were promised?

So they are back to asking, "Why, why, why?" A favorite question of ours as well from little on! Why is this happening? Why me? Why is it so hard? Why didn't God just do this instead? And what lies at the heart of us glaring up to the sky asking "why?" is the venomous idea that God is not acting in our best interest, that in spite of everything he has done, he either is not good or he is holding out on us. That's the venomous bite the devil, who showed up in the form of a snake, struck in the heart of Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit. He made them think God wasn't good and that they could gain what God was holding back from them. That deadly venom has been working death in each and every one of us ever since.

So what is God going to do with his children this time when they ask, "Why did you bring us out here to die?" He does what only a loving God would do. He disciplines his grumbling and belligerent children. "**The LORD sent venomous snakes among them, they bit the people and many of the Israelites died.**" (6). "How can this be the action of a gracious and loving God?" you ask. "**Because the Lord disciplines those he loves.**" (Hebrews 12:6). He loves them enough not to let them stay in their sin, but he does a hard thing to bring them back from it, back to repentance. That's exactly the result! "**The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you.'**" (Numbers 21:7)

This is the first time in the whole book of Numbers where it is recorded that the people acknowledge their sin and confess it. God used the snakes to show just how deadly their sin was. Many don't want that kind of God, a God of real love, who calls you away from deadly sin. Instead, what many want is a God who doesn't care what you do at all, and leaves you to do whatever you want. But our God loves us too much to let the Ancient Serpent's deadly venom rot our souls forever. So he calls us out of sin, just like he did with the Israelites and the snakes.

It's interesting, though, the way God gives them the cure. The people ask Moses, "**Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.**" (Numbers 21:7) But that's not what God does. He doesn't just take the consequences of sin away. He makes them look at a reminder of what was killing them. The LORD said to Moses, "**Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.**" (Num. 21:8).

Now wait just a second! John Wayne taught us all how to deal with a snake bite in the Classic American Western True Grit. When a snake bit a young girl, Wayne's character Rooster Cogburn comes to the rescue. He tourniquets the wound to stop the venom from spreading, he cuts an X on the bite and he sucks the venom and spits it out. Then rides miles through the frontier until his pony gives out. Then he carries her himself the rest of the way. A little True Grit, that's what it takes to deal with a snake bite.

But this?? What a strange and peculiar antidote this is! There is nothing about this bronze snake that should naturally or medically make this an effective remedy. You can't just look at a bottle of medicine to make you better. You can't look at the vaccine to receive the antibodies. Every medical textbook would tell us that on any normal occasion, this won't work, but the voice of God our Father tells us that it will! **"Look and live!"** he says. Trust me and you will live!

"Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived." (Numbers 21:9). It worked because God said it would, and those who looked to the snake in faith, trusting what God said, lived! With this true and dramatic story about real snakes and real people, God teaches us about the only way we can receive the cure for the Devil's deadly bite—by looking, not doing, not fixing, but looking in faith. It turns out the Rooster Cogburn method, effective in the movies, actually will only cause more harm than to a snake bite wound, and the same is true if we try to cure ourselves from sin's venom.

But the story of the Bronze Snake teaches us what faith truly is: "the serious looking of sin-stricken, snake-bitten people towards God's peculiar and radical display of mercy,"¹ trusting that it will save.

So the Bronze Snake cured their snake bites, but what is the antidote for sinners who need saving from the Ancient Serpent's bite? This is one of those jaw-dropping moments where the Bible fits together in such a spectacular way. In our gospel lesson today, Jesus was teaching Nicodemus about the cure for spiritual death. He mentions this very story about the Bronze Snake that Nicodemus would've known since he was 5. Jesus said, **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life." (John 3:15)**

Jesus lifted up on the cross—that's peculiar antidote that God gives to save us from the Devil's bite and eternal death! Did you know this whole story of the Bronze Snake is the object lesson for the most familiar passage in the Bible--John 3:16 **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** God is not holding out on us, not even his own Son. He gives him up for us all. Look to the Son, lifted up for the sins of the world—a peculiar antidote indeed. Believe in him and you will have life, and have it to the full. Look and live. Amen.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. Amen. (Romans 16:20).

¹ Papa, Matt. *Look and Live*. Bethany House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. 2014